

How social media help save an endangered language

February 21 2012, By Diane Swanbrow

(PhysOrg.com) -- There was a time when everyone living in Michigan grew up speaking the native language of the area's indigenous people. Now less than 10 people born in the state are fluent, yet more than 2,700 people "like" the language on Facebook.

Howard Kimewon, who teaches in the University of Michigan's Ojibwe Language program, part of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts Program in [American Culture](#), was born in Ontario and grew up speaking the language there. His colleague Margaret Noori learned the language later in life in Minnesota, where she grew up. And now she is combining her background in [linguistics](#) and marketing with a facility for social media and technology to leverage interest in the language she has come to love.

"I want to use every available platform to its utmost," said Noori, director of the U-M Comprehensive Studies Program and a lecturer in the Ojibwe language and literature. Noori is making a presentation on crossing the [digital divide](#) to help save endangered and minority languages on Feb.17 at the annual meeting of the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) (AAAS) in Vancouver, Canada.

In her talk, she will explore ways that tools of modern life from [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to YouTube are helping to keep the [native language](#) of the Ojibwe people—called Ashininaabemowin—alive.

"We started our website — www.ojibwe.net — in 2006," Noori said.

The goals: to produce proficiency in the next generation, and to archive the contributions of fluent elders.

"We save all the posts of fluent elders, and archive them at the Bentley, adding to the storehouse of information about this endangered language."

The website now contains more than 450 audio files, in addition to lessons, songs, and stories. During 2011, more than 9,000 people made 16,519 visits to the website, according to Noori. The site contains a series of spoken lessons and examples of the language, aimed at people who are auditory and visual learners. And the social media sites are all accessible from the website, to encourage feedback and help connect visitors to each other.

According to Noori, about 400 people in Michigan now use the language, but about 80 percent of Anishinaabemowin speakers are over the age of 65. She estimates the total number of speakers, including those from other states and from Canada, at about 15,000 or less.

This language is one of about 27 Algonquian languages spoken in and around the Great Lakes. At one point, more than 200 reservations, or reserves—as they're called in Canada—would have used Anishinaabemowin as their home language.

Provided by University of Michigan

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